

PEARL LIBOW  
BIRTHDATE: 1906  
INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 15, 1978  
AGE AT INTERVIEW: 72  
INTERVIEWER: ELIZABETH YEW  
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY:  
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

RUSSIA, 1922  
AGE 16

SHIP: LA FRANCE  
PORT:  
RESIDENCES  
RUSSIA:  
US:

HISTORIAN.S NOTE: The following interview is one of six conducted and donated by Dr. Elizabeth Yew, in 1977-1978, for use in a history of the medical inspection of immigrants at Ellis Island. The original audio recordings and transcriptions are housed in the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland. Her sister is also present.

YEW: Today is February 15, 1978 and I am sitting here with Miss. Pearl Libow who was a patient in the Ellis Island hospital in 1922. Miss Libow, what country did you come from?

LIBOW: From Russia.

YEW: And can you tell me about the journey from Russia to France before you got on the boat, what you remember about it?

LIBOW: Journey?.

YEW: The journey from Russia to France. How did you get to France?

LIBOW: How did we get to France?

YEW: Yes.

LIBOW: By - by train.

YEW: And how long did it take?

LIBOW: A few days, I think. This I - I - I can't remember exactly how much time it took.

YEW: How old were you then?

LIBOW: Sixteen. Fifteen and a half and then I became sixteen.

YEW: And who did you travel; with?

LIBOW: My mother, my sister, my brother -- my -- my two brothers.

YEW: And then what was the name of the boat that you took to America?

LIBOW: La France.

YEW: And what class did you travel?

LIBOW: Second.

YEW: Second class.

LIBOW: Yes.

YEW: Can you tell me what happened to you on the boat?

LIBOW: I got sick and then they took my temperature and they find out that I had a very high temperature and they had to put me on -- in cold sheets and - and take down the temperature. But I had the temperature for a long time. And then they took me off from the boat and they placed me in Broad Street Hospital.

YEW: Broad Street Hospital?

LIBOW: Yes.

YEW: And this was in 1922.

LIBOW: Yes.

YEW: The journey took six days, you said, on the ship?

LIBOW: Excuse me?

YEW: The journey took about six days to get from France to America?

LIBOW: Yes, yes.

YEW: And when did you get sick? Do you remember?

LIBOW: On - on -on the boat, the minute I got on the boat.

YEW: You mean the second day or the next day?

LIBOW: No, the same day. I had the chills and --

YEW: The first day you were on the ship?

LIBOW: On the ship, yes.

YEW: Were you the only passenger to get sick? Do you remember?

LIBOW: I know of myself. I don't know about the rest of them.

YEW: So when you were taken off the boat, you were transferred to another boat?

LIBOW: No, no, no.

YEW: What happened?

LIBOW: On this boat they ta--they took me right away to Broad Street Hospital and that's where I stayed for sixteen days. And then the doctor said I could go home, but we had to go through - through Ellis Island, they should let me go home. So then they decided to check me through there and I - I stay two weeks.

YEW: So first you were in the Broad Street Hospital and then you had to go through Ellis Island before you could leave.

LIBOW: Yes, before I checked out.

YEW: And the doctors at Ellis Island said you had to stay in the Ellis Island Hospital before you could come into the--

LIBOW: Two - two weeks I stayed there.

YEW: Were you allowed visitors in the hospital?

LIBOW: Yes, once a week. And when they came they had to be dressed in white - in white clothes and a mask on their faces because they thought it was very contagious, this sickness. So they didn't want any-- you know, they took every - the same sickness. They let them stay for an hour and once a week.

YEW: Do you remember any of the doctors at Ellis Island?

LIBOW: No.

YEW: Did a doctor come to see you every day? Do you remember that?

LIBOW: Yes, they used to come and visit me and then nurses used to come and see me. Just to -- routine work, nothing as far as medication is concerned. They didn't give me no medicine at all.

YEW: So how many times a day did you see a doctor? Do you remember?

LIBOW: No, just once a day.

YEW: Once a day.

LIBOW: In the morning they used to go there -- they have check through all - all the rooms -all the patients.

YEW: Were they wearing a uniform do you remember or were they wearing white clothes, the doctors?

LIBOW: No. White clothes.

YEW: White clothes.

LIBOW: Even the nurses used to be in white clothes.

YEW: Can you describe the doctors and nurses? Were they very nice to you?

LIBOW: Yeah. They were very nice.

YEW: Both the doctors and the nurses.

LIBOW: Very nice, yes, yes.

YEW: Tell me the story you told me before about the nurse, about the parakeet.

LIBOW: About who?

YEW: About the parakeet.

SISTER: That the nurse brought you the parakeet.

LIBOW: She used to feel sorry for me why I'm alone and I used to be very lonesome. To stay just and see the ground floor and I used to see the - the boat --the boats passing by. And she -- so she used to bring me everyday the parakeet to keep me company. She was so sweet, I could never forget her. You know, I used to--. And you're young yet you feel lonesome, (?)--I can't even talk now. So she always used to come in, you know, like to talk to me. I -- I shouldn't worry, it will take another day, another day, and I'll be able to go home.

YEW: What language did you speak at this time?

SISTER: Was she [not understood]

LIBOW: What she - somehow -- maybe she was Jewish, I don't even remember, but she understood me whatever I said.

YEW: Oh, so she understood your language.

LIBOW: If not, they call in - if not, they call in someone.

SISTER: An interpreter.

YEW: There was an interpreter?

LIBOW: Yes.

YEW: So whenever the nurses and doctors came to visit, was there always an interpreter with them?

LIBOW: Yes. Yeah.

YEW: How was the food?

LIBOW: The food was good, but to me everything didn't taste so good because I was so emotional upset. After being sick sixteen days I was very thin. I weighed only 90 pounds. And - and so I -- whenever I used to start to talk or eat, I used to get choked up because I was so disturbed that who knows that - like they'll ever take me home. So even my brother used to come and says, "Don't worry. If they wouldn't let you -- If they'll want to send you back we'll find a different way - which way you should remain in this country."

YEW: So you thought that they would send you back to Europe?

SISTER: They didn't think of it, but she was thinking.

LIBOW: I - I felt because - see, like my room was here -- another room facing me. So there was another girl and she said, "Look, once they keep you here, that means they'll send you back. Because if you still - still have your sickness in you, they wouldn't let you go - go out in this country." So again - oh -so I figured maybe the girl knows more than I do and (?) going to send me back. So when my mother and my brother came, I told them, I said "I heard that maybe they will send me back." I'm telling - I didn't --

YEW: Then that girl didn't know after all what-

SISTER: No. She just -- If she would still have the sickness, they wouldn't let her out from hosp-- from hospital. If she would have --.

LIBOW: I said that we're your SISTER and my SISTER.

YEW: That's alright.

LIBOW: So. But no. After that, in fact, they didn't even know that my -my father or my brother and they send me out to the HIAS. They called the HIAS. There's a certain place, I don't know if it's still in existence. If there is no relatives that they take you out in time, so they call this particular place and they take you out. And then they notify you the same day or a day later that they should come and take out the - the person that is released from Ellis Island. So they brought me to this place and then they notified at night my father and my brother and they came and they took me home. And I traveled with a - with a cab and I saw all the lights and they brought me. At that time they lived on the fourth floor. I was running up like a madman. It's very sad thing when - when you look forward to come here and -- and I didn't see my father for a long time. I'm crazy -- (Sobs)

SISTER: What's the matter with you?

LIBOW: When you are very young, it's a - it's a terrible thing. Anything else? I'm crying. I'm crazy. (laughs)

YEW: Anything else you remember about your stay in the hospital?

LIBOW: No. I don't see - in -- in Broad Street Hospital I was under medication, and they hardly gave me any food.

YEW: If you compare the treatment you got at the Broad Street Hospital with the treatment at the Ellis Island, were they nicer? Which hospital were they nicer to you or was it the same in both places?

LIBOW: They were both - they were both good as far as I was concerned. But there--there I -- I was just for a checkup and in the hospital, I was in Broad Street Hospital, was -- I was under medication. See, that's - that's the difference.

YEW: Had you ever been in the hospital in Russia?

LIBOW: No.

YEW: No. So you couldn't compare?

LIBOW: No, no, I was never.

SISTER: She was a healthy girl.

LIBOW: But I got the germ someplace. See, because we stopped in a few places before we came to Paris. I was in (?). We were in a different city. So, who knows? Maybe the water or maybe it was too much for me to - to travel around.

YEW: Before you came to America, did you hear rumors about Ellis Island or what sort of place it was? You knew what to expect when you came?

LIBOW: No, I didn't know anything.

YEW: Nobody told you that there would be a place where you would have to go through any kind of examination or anything?

LIBOW: No, no, the minute I - I came on the boat and that time I was deathly sick. I must have been, God knows how much temperature, they treated me that way. They used to take me out from one bed to another bed with cold sheets, cold applications to my whole body.

YEW: So did you come in at the same time?

SISTER: Yes, yes.

YEW: You didn't go through Ellis Island or did you go through Ellis Island?

SISTER: No, they took me off from the boat with my brother and my father came to fish us from the boat, and we went home. But, her, they took her right to the hospital. When she came on the boat, she was alright. In the middle of the night she got sick. So she says, "I don't feel so good."

YEW: So you were traveling in second class, so that means the doctors came to look at you while you were on the ship. Do you remember that, when the doctors came on the ship.

SISTER: Not me, her, her.

YEW: No, but it was supposed to be that if you were second class, the United States doctors would--

LIBOW: They must have called in a doctor because I had the chills and I was dea-- deadly sick. I assume, I don't remember.

SISTER: Yes, yes, they called in a doctor. My brother went to report that she don't feel good, she had a headache. So they say -- in a minute, the doctor came to examine her. He says, "No good you should be in the room. We have to take her to the hospital." There were - beautiful. On the first fl -- first class were the hospital. I used to gone down to see her.

YEW: This was on the ship?

SISTER: What a (?) bigger than out apartment.

LIBOW: (?) they don't have to know on this.

YEW: Oh, that's alright. Just say whatever you remember. Oh, that's --

SISTER: You don't remember, but I remember.

YEW: What do you remember about the hospital on the ship?

SISTER: Beautiful. They - they used to take very good care on her.

YEW: Did you go to visit the hospital at Ellis Island?

SISTER: No. They wouldn't allow it. Only my brother and my mother. Only my brother and my mother.

YEW: Was that because you were too young?

SISTER: They wouldn't let me in. I couldn't go down there.

LIBOW: They would only let in two peo - two patients. Two people, that's all they let in.

SISTER: [not understood]

LIBOW: I hope it should help you.

YEW: There is nothing else you want to tell me about what happened?

LIBOW: No. What can I -? I -- I remember I am telling you. The doctors and the nurses in both places, they were very nice to me. But, you know, I - I was 13 and so young, so when doctor see, I am sure they -

they have a certain feeling towards a younger person. They used to joke around because I didn't know anything as far as English, so they used to motion to me. Once a sister, a nun, came and she brought me ice cream and she - she wanted to have some fun, I believe. She says to me, "You know what this is?" I understood that she meant something on that order. So I -- she said, "Say ice cream." She wanted I should say - say - I should say it's ice cream. So she kept on telling me, "Say ice cream," and I repeated, "Say ice cream, say ice cream." So today was a lot of fun.

YEW: So I guess you were so scared at being in the hospital and so depressed--

LIBOW: Yes, this was the first time for me and - and I felt very upset because we looked so much forward that we'll have such a nice time that my brother came for us and everything came very easy for us. We didn't have to the - the whatever - that you know - know the - the - whatever that you - necessary. And here I got sick and I spoiled - pleasure. And here I got sick and I spoiled the whole pleasure.

YEW: Oh, I don't think you spoiled it.

LIBOW: It's really a-- . To me it's was very upsetting because I knew how much my parents will suffer by it and even my brother, he meant so well, and here everything went wrong.

YEW: But everything turned out right in the end.

LIBOW: Yeah. Today -- it turned out right.

SISTER: People wouldn't believe that she weighed only 90 pounds. That's all she weighed when she came out of there.

LIBOW: They didn't give me nothing but a little bit hot water.

YEW: This was in Broad Street Hospital or Ellis Island?

LIBOW: No. NO. You know, on Broad Street. They gave me no --

YEW: Was that part of the therapy or part of the treatment?

LIBOW: I - I -- it was part of, I suppose the sickness. Maybe I had a lot of temperature and they weren't allowed to give me that, no food. When I used to see that they bring food to every patient and not to me. Later on, you know, maybe -- my appetite came back. I use to hate it then. Why they don't give me any food. Many times later on they start to give you tea with a little biscuit or something, but nothing solid food.

YEW: But at Ellis Island Hospital they started to feed you there?

LIBOW: Yes. You know, they gave me a little. But -- why they had to take me and there was suffer. But after a -

YEW: [not understood]

LIBOW: Well, they figured that if I had something like typhoid fever, I could bring it in and many more people will get sick of it. So I don't blame them for doing it. For me, it was no picnic.--(laughs)

YEW: So when you were released from the hospital, you were cured?

LIBOW: Yes, yes. Sure, I was -- I was all cured.

SISTER: Never had a [not understood]

YEW: Well, that is good.

SISTER:: Nothing all we say.

YEW: (laughs) Nothing else?

LIBOW: Nothing else. Whatever you wish, I'll -- whatever I know, I'll be able to help you.

YEW: Well, if you remember anything new, just call me on the phone and I'll come right over.

LIBOW: Thank you. No, I-- I have nothing else that I can recall, that I forgot to tell you whatever -- this was the main - the main subject.

YEW: So when you had so many hopes about coming to America and everything, did anything in your experience at the hospital disappoint you about America or did you feel good about America?

LIBOW: No, I was glad as long as they were able to cure me and then it was beyond them as far as the Ellis Island wanted to check me through again. These - they couldn't help it. They thought that I'm perfect and I could go home, but they didn't believe them. I suppose that's the way they have to work that way, to be checked over by their own doctors.

YEW: So your experiences at the hospital didn't make you disappointed in America?

LIBOW: No. No. No. They were all very nice and they gave me hopes. But I couldn't discuss with them how long will I have to stay or how long - or they'll keep me there or what because I couldn't speak English. And that's what kept me back to know anything. And that's what that made me more upset because I didn't know where I stand. And I couldn't speak to my parents or to my brother or to any of my relatives. So I had to wait till they gave me the right decision.

SISTER: It's a long stretch.

LIBOW: There are so many young little children that they are kept in - in - in a room by themselves. It's really [not understood] heart-breaking when you come there and you see people being kept from - it --

it's a reason for them. But to me everyone looked healthy-looking. But they have reasons for keeping them. They want to save the - the rest of the people that they are here. You can't blame them.

YEW: Okay, thank you very much.

LIBOW: It's my pleasure. I am glad that you came and I'm glad if it's will be of any help to you.

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